



ROOTED

MEREDITH MCCORD, WHO HAS 168 IGFA RECORDS, CREDITS
HER FAMILY, GOD AND THE WILDERNESS LAKES AROUND NESTOR
FALLS, ONTARIO, WITH HER SUCCESS IN FISHING AND LIFE



McCord's nephews share her passion for fishing the lakes and bays of the family stomping grounds in Ontario.

Loons broadcast their haunting, ethereal calls while a pair of bald eagles gossip in a raucous twilight chatter. Buried nearly a foot deep under layers of thick blankets on a screened porch, I slowly peel back the covers from over my head and squint across Sabaskong Bay on Lake of the Woods, which is calm and covered by a thick but shallow layer of fog.

A cacophony of metal breaks the silence. Rods, pistons and valves drum in a rhythmic, deafening march as the de Havilland Beaver we'll ride into the wilderness makes its way toward the island. Loaded down with outboards, fishing rods and tackle boxes, with a Grumman sport boat strapped to one of the floats, we lift off through the mist, and I get a bird's-eye view of the granite, spruce, cedar and birch that rim the shorelines and islands.

Loaded with walleye, northern pike, smallmouth and musky, this little slice of fishing heaven near Nestor Falls, Ontario, is the summer retreat of the McCord family, who owns several islands in the area. On board with me is International Game Fish Association world record holder Meredith McCord, one of the grandchildren of Charles "Scotty" and Mary McCord, who in 1954 bought an island here to summer with their four boys — Mike, Rick, Steve and Charles. Sixty-five years later, Charles and Steve own islands, and others nearby remain in the family.

We circle a lake known as Upper Twin. The pilot, Mark Daley, looks for a break in the fog. "Not sure we're going to be able to set down in there," he says. "It's looking kind of thick." Then a long seam opens, and Daley surgically maneuvers the float plane to the lake.

We launch the canoe. The lake is quiet, calm and mystical. The fog seemingly thickens in defiance of the sun. McCord sits alone in a canoe tying fly leaders and tippets with precision. She's used this knot knowledge, in part, to secure 168 IGFA records on conventional and fly tackle over the last seven years (plus 12 records pending). And it's in this corner of Canada where she fell in love with fishing.

We're joined by family friends Mac Helseth and his teenage son, Wyatt, who jumps into the canoe with me and photographer Stephan Gian Dombaj, an accomplished fly angler in his own rite. Helseth and McCord set off in pursuit of muskies, while we're content to chuck lures at the structure around the lake's shoreline.

As the fog finally lifts, Dombaj reels in a big-shouldered smallmouth on a Texas-rigged worm. "There are four or five others right behind him!" he shouts. Wyatt and I plunge our rods into the water, twist them around in a figure-eight pattern under the canoe and then triple up, each of us landing chunky smallies. The action goes on for hours, and we catch at least 100 bass each by noon. By the end of the day, McCord has landed a 40-plus-inch musky, and our party has caught and released more than 600 smallmouth bass.

We're exhausted. McCord, Dombaj and I load into the plane for the short trip back to Sabaskong Bay. "So what do you think?" McCord asks over the plane's intercom. "Absolutely crazy," I reply, attempting to describe one of the best fishing days of my life.

We touch down and float up to Sunshine Island, where





A pair of nice muskies caught by Dombaj and McCord are cause for celebration on Wigwam Lake, which is accessed by plane.

McCord begins cooking tacos. While dinner is underway, I start learning about this place that has inspired four generations of McCord fish folk.

McCord's grandparents, Scotty and Mary, bought Two Bear Island in 1954. "It's the next island over," McCord says. "Scotty gave Mary and their four boys a choice: They could spend six weeks touring Europe or buy an island in Canada."

"It was an easy choice," says Steve McCord, Meredith's uncle, who owns nearby Midway Island. Her Uncle Charles owns an island just down the way. "My dad found an ad for Two Bear Island in *Field and Stream* magazine and then brought up the idea with my mother. They were asking \$27,000. My father offered them \$17,000. They accepted, and the rest is a lot of good memories and fun stories."

Business and Faith

The next morning, the raucous sounds of children pour through the screen door to my cabin. "Aunt Mere-Mere, Aunt Mere-Mere," scream the four children of McCord's cousin

Elizabeth. The two girls and twin boys join us, along with McCord's uncles Steve and Charles, Aunt Suzanne and local guide Robin Holden. We launch a walleye expedition to another part of Lake of the Woods, where we'll catch our lunch and fry it up as part of a hearty shore meal, a family ritual for 65 years.

At 6 years old, twins Dylan and Ryder are already competitive anglers and catch one walleye after the other, making adults in our party look like amateurs. We've caught our limit after an hour and head for a remote rock outcropping for lunch. Holden fillets the walleye as sisters Remy and Lyons and the boys throw the discards to eager pelicans. I find a gnarled root at the base of a cedar tree shaped like a lounge chair, lay down a couple of boat cushions and dig into my plate of fresh-fried potato chips, walleye, pike and yellow perch, with home-made tartar sauce. Eight-year-old Lyons joins me. And soon, so does her Aunt Mere-Mere. "What's cool about what we're doing?" McCord asks Lyons.

"It's handed down from generation to generation," she replies without hesitation.

"Why is that important?"

"Because it's family," Lyons says.

Soon the kids are frolicking in the cold lake. Remy, the youngest, is hesitant but joins her siblings. McCord joins in, too, playing games to see who can touch bottom as everyone clings to each other. The rest of us lie stuffed like beached whales after the feast.

"Those kids love Meredith," Charles McCord's wife, Suzanne, says. "And she has so much love for them. I love watching this." We clean up, then pile into the boats for the 30-minute ride back to Sabaskong Bay.

That evening, McCord and I settle into her cabin's living room as a rainstorm passes. She tells me she was born in 1974, to parents Rick and Jane in Houston, and has two siblings, Ryan and Anne. "Dad and my uncles each bought an island here in the '80s," McCord says. "In 1981, Dad bought this island and named it Sunshine after my mom. That's what he called her."

I ask McCord about a typical day here as a kid. "We'd always do breakfast first and then head for the water in our boats and canoes,"



The McCord family knows Ontario’s islands and lakes intimately. A typical summer day involves fishing by floatplane and blueberry picking (below).

she recalls. “Depending on how old we were, we could set out fishing or on other adventures. Those first trips in canoes with a little 4.5-hp Johnson outboard taught me independence and cemented my love of fishing. These traditions have fed the whole family’s love of fishing.”

McCord, who has piercing eyes, a broad, contagious smile and flowing blonde hair, says she and her siblings learned to fish in the lakes and ponds that her father stocked on a property called MerRyAn Farm near Navasota, Texas. Ezekiel was the name of the 10-acre lake where she caught her first bass.

Earlier in the week, McCord and I are fishing a walleye honey-hole called Baras Lake when she lands a bruiser. We’re the only ones on the lake, and as McCord releases the fish, she explains how she and her father discovered fly-fishing. “My dad and I simultaneously but separately learned to fly-fish. He had bought a place in Belize in the early ’90s, and we saw folks fly-fishing the flats there,” she says. “When I graduated from Vanderbilt University in 1996, I set out to spend the summer in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, motivated by the movie *A River Runs Through It*.

“The move to Jackson Hole came with very specific rules from my dad,” McCord continues. He would pay her car and health insurance for four months, but she had to get a job while she was there and have a stable job waiting for her in the fall. With a commercial real estate position waiting in Atlanta, she headed west. “I completely fell in love with it,” she says. “Of course, I thought I was going to master fly-fishing in four months. Little did I know that fly-fishing takes a lifetime to master, and even then, there’s more to learn.”

McCord returned to Atlanta in early 1997, where she discovered a paint-your-own-pottery studio. “A friend had a wedding shower where all her friends painted pottery for the couple’s new home,” she says. “I thought it



The family has been summering on islands near Nestor Falls, Ontario, for 65 years.



was incredible, so I started going to the shop and creating my own gifts. I was there so often that the owners asked me about buying a franchise, but I knew I wanted to run my own business.”

In 1998, at age 24, McCord opened The Mad Potter, the first of five paint-your-own-pottery locations she would own around Houston and Austin, Texas. “Owning that business allowed me a balanced life of traveling,” she says. “I had outstanding people running my stores, allowing me some freedom to pursue other passions.”

Though it only pops up occasionally in our conversations, faith is an essential component of McCord’s life, as it is for her entire family. We’re talking about fishing late one evening, with McCord wrapped in a comforter on her couch, when she opens up about her relationship with God. She felt the call one Sunday in church to start doing mission work, and in 1998, she made her first trip to a Russian orphanage. McCord’s dad wasn’t thrilled about it.



The wilderness is dotted with lakes, fish and lots of family memories.



(From left) Steve McCord prepares a fresh catch for lunch; Lyons enjoys the fish fry; McCord's nephew has fishing in his blood.

"Like many folks of his generation, Dad believed that Russia was our enemy and that I should not go, but I went anyway," she says. "The next year, my mom went with me and the following year, so did my dad. We worked with the same kids for 14 years. I eventually expanded that work to South Africa, Zambia, El Salvador and Bolivia. That mission work is where I developed a love for traveling and exploring the world, and it deepened my faith."

'You're Nobody'

McCord's first big fishing trip was in 2005 to the Seychelles with her dad and a group of 10 other guys. It was supposed to be an all-male trip, but there was a cancellation, and her dad put her name into the hat. McCord says the group adopted her over the next 10 years. The Seychelles opened her eyes to the many saltwater species she could cast to with a fly rod. She and her father would travel and fish together for the next decade.

I assumed that McCord's ability to travel the world was financed by her business and her successful family, but she has worked hard to make those trips happen. "I was doing OK, but I couldn't afford to make those trips and

pay for it all," McCord says. "I was looking for any and all opportunities to go fishing."

She used the airline miles she'd accumulated on her credit card buying inventory for her stores. And she relied on the kindness and generosity of lodge owners and guides, as well as last-minute cancellations, to pursue the species she wanted to catch.

In 2011, McCord landed a trip that changed everything. Paul Vahldiek, of Deep Water Cay in the Bahamas, extended an invitation to two of McCord's dad's buddies, and they had room for an additional person, so she went.

"When we got there, Paul surprised us by telling us that we were the only ones on the island that week, along with a film crew and cast for *Buccaneers and Bones*," she says, referring to the television program. "Right after we landed, a private plane landed, and off came Liam Neeson. Being more of a trout guy, he asked if I knew saltwater fly-fishing, so I agreed to work with him on his double-haul. That prompted the producers to ask, 'Who are you?' to which I replied, 'I'm Meredith McCord. I'm from Houston, and I own pottery shops.' " They asked if she'd thought about doing television work. She asked if that meant free travel and fishing, and they said, "Yeah,

but you have to be somebody, and, well, you're nobody."

The group brainstormed how McCord could legitimize herself, and someone suggested she pursue IGFA records. As we're discussing world records in her cabin, Dylan, Ryder, Remy and Lyons burst through the door. "Mere-Mere, c'mon, let's go pick blueberries!" We follow the rambunctious lot outside to pick blueberries, most of which end up eaten. The boys veer off with their fishing rods and start slinging lures under the boats in McCord's boathouse, coming up with several nice yellow perch. I sense that the love of fishing is safe in the hands of this next generation.

Becoming Somebody

The kids pile back in the boat, and McCord and I pour ourselves a drink and break out some leftover ribs. She tells me she started pursuing her first world record out of Venice, Louisiana, in 2012. She needed a redfish weighing more than 30 pounds on 16-pound-class tippet. "I told myself on the 11th day, after dozens of broken off fish and frustration, that I'd quit if I didn't land one before the end of the day," she says. "At about 2 p.m.



More than just the fish, the lakes McCord grew up on hold sentimental value.

on Dec. 1, I landed a 32.58-pound redfish on 16-pound tippet. Finally, I was a somebody,” McCord says with a grin. “So I found the producers of *Buccaneers and Bones* and was invited on the show.”

McCord says the records are nice, but the most rewarding part was how it affected her relationship with her father. “My dad was so proud of me. He was always telling people about me and my fishing,” she says. “The best gift I ever received was a custom fly rod he gave to me for Christmas the year I broke my first record. It had the specifics of the record inscribed on it. He was my biggest supporter.”

McCord landed her next 50 or so world records during the winter of 2013 from the most unlikely, less-exotic of places: in the lakes, rivers and dams within an hour or so drive of her Houston home. She hooked up with Kirk

Kirkland, who is known for putting anglers on alligator gar. He wasn’t specifically into fly-fishing, but he was interested in helping McCord, and she was on a limited budget, so they targeted line-class records for about 10 species. “By spring 2014, I had 50 world records,” McCord says. “It was amazing and humbling.”

Later that year, McCord got news she describes as a “kick in the gut.” After a memorable trip to the Seychelles, her father was diagnosed with late-term kidney cancer. The pair made a couple of trips to Belize, went hunting and then McCord took her father to the Texas Gulf Coast to fish. “He was adamant that he was going to be OK, that he only had a few small hurdles to get over,” she says. “He was always the optimist, and he was insistent that I keep chasing world records. Eventually, they told him it was too dangerous to go on trips

with me. It was around then that I admitted to myself he was in trouble and that he likely wouldn’t make it. That’s when I promised him I’d secure 100 world records ... just for him.”

Rick McCord died in October 2015. “I was at 78 world records when he passed,” says McCord, with emotion. “But eight months later, on Father’s Day in 2016, I went to fish Lake Ezekiel on our farm where Dad taught me to fish.” She landed her 100th world record. “It wasn’t a very impressive one, but it was a record nonetheless.”

McCord sold her pottery businesses last year and now plans and hosts fishing trips around the world. “I love these trips,” she says. She enjoys making sure everyone has a good time, and sharing her knowledge with anyone who has the fishing bug. “It’s what makes me tick,” she says. “The records are less important these days.”

You can see that willingness to teach when twins Dylan and Ryder join McCord for an evening outing at Upper Twin, where we’d caught so many fish earlier in the week. I’d noticed they were flinging lures better than many adults with whom I’ve fished. They also knew exactly where to put them. “I love sharing with those two guys and all my relatives’ kids,” McCord says. “It’s rewarding to watch people improve and succeed in the sport.”

McCord continues to pursue world records. She’s chasing Roberta Arostegui’s 197 IGFA records but has a way to go. “I’m competitive and tenacious, for sure, but records are not what it’s all about,” she notes.

Near the last day, McCord, Dombaj and I fly into Wigwam Lake. By the time the pilot and I unload, McCord and Dombaj are each reeling in muskies. I motor over to

the reef and launch a topwater lure. Three tugs in, a musky porpoises on the lure. I try again, and only feet from the boat another smacks my lure with its tail. On the next cast, I sink into a hefty musky. It launches into the air and shakes the two treble hooks free. Simultaneously, McCord and Dombaj hook up with two stunning muskies. We all laugh hysterically.

The evening reminded me of the last entry in Mary McCord’s fishing journal, which she kept from 1954 until her last visit to Sabaskong Bay, in 2008. The matriarch is 107 years old. “I truly love these good people up here — I shall miss them so. ... Yes — life here is peaceful and beautiful and close to God. I shall truly miss it all, but it is time to say goodbye. I am ever grateful.”

As are we.

The Records Game

Chasing records is a game that Meredith McCord relishes. She believes each record pursued and fish caught makes her a better angler, and she credits her success to the knowledge, skill and patience of her guides.

McCord’s average fight lasts three minutes and 42 seconds, according to the International Game Fish Association. She and Capt. Kirk Kirkland once landed 12 records in a day, encompassing five species. But she says catching fish such as Atlantic salmon, muskie and spotted sea trout, which can require days in pursuit, is more thrilling.

Her favorite fish to catch are red drum and black drum. Sight casting allows her to judge a fish’s size before committing. McCord quips that, without fail, once she is tight to a fish that “would never do it,” a record swims by. She has spent days landing fish after fish that are a half-pound short of a record.

Of her 168 IGFA records (plus 12 pending), McCord’s favorite is her latest red drum record: a 40-pound, 14-ounce fish caught on the fly with 8-pound class tippet in Louisiana last year with Capt. Camp Walker. It beat the women’s record of 32 pounds, as well as the men’s fly record on 8-pound tippet.

Conservationally minded, McCord is primarily a catch-and-release angler. The International Game Fish Association allows anglers to weigh their catch in a sling or net to put as little pressure as possible on the fish.

McCord holds records for the following species:

- golden dorado (Bolivia)
- speckled peacock bass (Brazil)
- northern pike (Canada)
- taimen (Mongolia)
- muskellunge (Virginia and Canada)
- largemouth and smallmouth bass (Texas and Canada)
- Atlantic and coho salmon (Iceland and Alaska)
- Atlantic snook
- gray and red snapper

One of McCord’s favorite challenges is putting up impressive line-to-fish-weight ratios. Some of these catches include:

- black drum: 43 pounds on 12-pound tippet (fly)
- alligator gar: 80 pounds on 30-pound line (conventional)
- brown trout: 11 pounds, 10 ounces on 6-pound tippet (fly)
- smallmouth buffalo: 9 pounds on 2-pound tippet (fly)